

Pastas from the Pantry



Stock your cupboard with ingredients to make pasta dinners in a flash

by Tony Rosenfeld , Fine Cooking #81

How to create your own quick pastas

Having a strategically stocked pantry and fridge is a prerequisite to whipping up an impromptu weeknight pasta dinner. So use the lists below to help with shopping (most of the items have a long shelf-life), then return to this page again as inspiration for making up your own quick pasta dish.

You don't have to choose something from each category—for example, some of the best pasta dishes don't include any "hefty" ingredient at all. When creating combinations, it's helpful to think about an ingredient's predominant flavor note: salty, smoky, citrusy, rich, herby, sharp, tangy, briny, etc. I try to balance different types of flavors to keep things interesting.

If you want some concrete examples to get you started, you can't go wrong with a simple puttanesca (canned tomatoes, garlic, capers, and anchovies) or an Amatriciana (pancetta, canned tomatoes, and pecorino). Or try classic pairings like peas, pancetta, and porcini mushrooms, or cannellini beans, Parmigiano, and rosemary. Once you get the hang of it, you'll be coming up with your own favorites in no time.

Start with a flavor foundation

Cut and cook these ingredients, then toss into the finished pasta.

Bacon – cook until crisp, then crumble

Garlic – chop or mince and sauté until golden and fragrant

Onions – slice and cook until caramelized

Pancetta – cube and cook until crisp

Add a little heft

If you want your dish to feel a bit more substantial, these ingredients can help fill it out.

Artichokes (jarred or canned) – thinly slice and sauté briefly before adding to the pasta

Canned beans – try cannellini or chickpeas, which have a mild flavor that goes well with pasta.

Canned tuna – drain and crumble

Dried mushrooms – rehydrate, chop, and saute briefly; use the soaking liquid for the sauce

Roasted red peppers (jarred)

Sun-dried tomatoes – use oil-packed tomatoes, which don't need to be rehydrated, and slice them thinly

Use cheese for richness

Grate, slice, or crumble these cheeses and toss with the hot pasta.

Feta

Goat cheese

Grana Padano

Parmigiano-Reggiano

Pecorino

Ricotta salata

For recipes using these ingredients see *Fine Cooking* #81 (October/November 2006)

Sauce it up

Add at least one of these liquidy ingredients to create a saucy consistency and a cohesive dish.

Canned tomatoes (diced) – simmer with other ingredients to form a quick, chunky sauce

Chicken broth – add to any sautéed ingredients, reduce, then mix with pasta for a brothier dish

Extra-virgin olive oil – use for sautéing and for drizzling before serving

Heavy cream – stir into a sauce, then reduce until thickened slightly

Pasta cooking water – if the dish seems dry as it's coming together, add a little reserved hot pasta water to help bind and moisten everything

Finish with punch

These can enliven the dish by adding a fresh, briny, acidic, or hot note, or even a bit of crunchy texture.

Anchovies – mash and add to sauce

Capers – use raw or fry until crisp

Crushed red pepper flakes

Fresh breadcrumbs – toss with olive oil and sauté until toasted

Fresh herbs

Frozen peas

Lemon – zest, juice, or both

Pine nuts – toast until golden

Pitted olives – Kalamatas or Gaetas

Prosciutto – add thin strips at the end

Vinegar – sherry, red-wine, or balsamic

Stock up for quick pasta dishes on demand

Pastas

- Long strands (spaghetti, fettuccine, linguine, capellini)
- Short tubular shapes (penne, rigatoni, ziti)
- Other shapes (orecchiette, fusilli, farfalle)

Produce

- Garlic
- Onions
- Lemons
- Fresh herbs
- Frozen peas

Dairy & Cheese

- Feta
- Goat cheese
- Grana Padano
- Parmigiano-Reggiano
- Pecorino
- Ricotta salata
- Heavy cream

Meat & Deli

- Bacon
- Pancetta
- Prosciutto

Dry Goods

- Canned tomatoes
- Canned beans
 - Cannellini
 - Chickpeas
- Canned tuna
- Artichokes (jarred or canned)
- Dried mushrooms
- Roasted red peppers (jarred)
- Sun-dried tomatoes (oil-packed)
- Chicken broth
- Extra-virgin olive oil
- Anchovies
- Capers
- Crushed red pepper flakes
- Fresh breadcrumbs
- Pine nuts
- Pitted olives
 - Kalamatas
 - Gaetas
- Vinegar
 - Sherry
 - Red wine
 - Balsamic

Other

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